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Welcome to the world of

ARIA

Somewhere around the corner, just beyond the edge of perception, lies a world you never dreamed existed...

The World of Aria.

A world where creatures of ancient myth, and gods long thought dead, walk unnoticed along the crowded streets of Manhattan. Where ladies of Faerie dance lonely nights away, bathed in a soft neon glow. Where every shadow holds a secret, and every secret has a price. Where danger and wonder can be found at any turn, if you only know where to look.

Next month, Avalon Studios will debut "Aria," a new, ongoing series that we hope you will agree is something a little different, a little special. A subtle blend of myth and magic, fact and fantasy, it charts the lives, loves and adventures of a strange young woman named Kildare, and her extraordinary circle of friends.

Herein you will find a brief glimpse into the world of Aria and meet some of the strange and amazing characters who populate its pages.

We hope you enjoy it.

I'll come to thee in the cloak of night.

An Aria tale

written by Brian Holguin

and illustrated by

Jay Anacleto

"All right, you little heathens. One story."

Kildare sighs for the second time tonight, brushing a stray bit of hair from her forehead. A soft murmur of excitement echoes through the room as she looks across the store, out across the strange sea of faces assembled before her: ghosts and witches, pirates and fairy princesses.

Outside, it is a perfect Halloween night. A bright orange moon hangs low in the sky. Up and down the street, the trees in the treewells are aflame with autumnal colors, their leaves bursting in bright sprays of brass and gold. Grimacing choirs of Jack-o-Lanterns sit vigil on the stoops of townhouses, construction paper witches hang in windows. But it is here, in this odd little store at the end of the block, the one whose sign simply reads, "Otherworld," that these children, two dozen perhaps, have gathered.

The shop sits on the ground floor of an antique brownstone. Normally the children of the neighborhood would never dream of entering, not even on a dare. But each Halloween without fail, they descend upon the store like crows. Drawn by some unheard siren song, it is as if the masks and make-up somehow grant them secret strength, a private, mythical persona which allows them entry into a world not their own. Tonight, they are permitted to dance freely with their own shadows.

Before she begins, Kildare passes around a bowl of candy, which the children devour hungrily. The sweets taste of vanilla and honey, and slide like fresh cream down their throats. All their mothers have warned them not to accept unwrapped treats, but somehow the rules of the real world don't seem to apply here. Here, tonight, things are different.

The kids soon settle in, arranging themselves in a rough half-moon, licking their fingers for the last gooey traces of the exotic confections. The room is cavernous, yet crowded. The children look around them, craning their necks and gazing up at dusty books that line the countless shelves, at strange antiques and oddly shaped bottles, at cracked and yellowed maps of continents they're certain were never mentioned in school.

Kildare moves to the staircase which leads to the upper levels of the building, up to the living quarters, and plops herself down on the third step. She sighs once more, rolling her eyes as if trying to think of the perfect story to share this night.

"Okay, you brats. Shut up or I won't start," she warns, though her voice rings out invitingly, belying her words. In any case, she need hardly mention it, for the instant she sits down, the room falls silent. Silent as a tomb, as the far side of the moon.

They look at Kildare with great anticipation, spellbound. She is strikingly beautiful, there's no question of that. An ancient, timeless beauty, the kind that they imagine should be found only in museums, cordoned off behind ropes of velvet.

The room stands silent for a while, the clicking metronome of an old clock the only sound. Kildare leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees. She clears her throat and begins her tale.

PRIVATE

"This is a story I first heard when I was a child, back where I come from. It begins as all the best stories begin...

Once upon a time, long, long ago, in a place that never really was, there was a handsome prince, a beautiful dark-eyed lady, a great dark tower, and a terrible curse. In short, all the ingredients for a truly happy ending. Or so you would think...

"In a vast, sunlit valley, next to a great forest, there was a bright and beautiful kingdom, where everything was carved of gold and ivory. It was a place filled with light and music and learning. Its universities were the greatest ever known to man. All the citizens of this kingdom were fair and healthy and never found much of anything to complain about.

"Now, the king was a brave and noble, if somewhat dull, man. He had four sons, all of whom were brave and dull themselves. Their whole lives they did their duty as it had been prescribed, readying themselves for the earnest business of state.

"But one day, the youngest prince was riding at the eastern reaches of the Kingdom, near were the sunny fields met the Forest. The prince rode for several hours without noticing the time, which wasn't like him at all. Soon, the

sun began to set, and he realized he had best head back home. But as he turned to leave, his eye caught something in the distance. It was a great, wild hart--

"--Hmm? That's like a deer, honey."

" -- a great hart, black as smoke, its antlers spread wide like branches of black lightning. The Prince had never seen such a creature and he gave chase, thinking to himself what a wonderful trophy this strange beast would make.

"The hart dashed into the forest and the Prince followed the creature, chasing it through the trees. Far, far into the woods he went, into the dim, dark areas where leaves were piled soft and moist, more than a foot deep. Soon, the Prince realized that he had lost track of the creature and, more than that, he had lost his way. The sky, what he could see of it through the thick canopy of trees, had turned dark and he did not know the path home.

"Fear gripped the Prince's heart, though he would never have admitted it. But just when he was at the very point of despair, he heard a strange sound wafting on the breeze. It was a voice, a beautiful voice singing in the darkness. He followed the sound and soon came to a glade, where the forest opened up and was bathed in the silvery paint of moonlight. There, dancing in spinning circles, was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

"She was tall and strong, and her hair, dark as sable, hung in wild tangles down to her waist. Her face was pale as the moon and her lips were red as freshly spilt blood. The Prince stepped down from his horse and watched the girl for a while. Soon, he gathered the nerve to speak, only to discover he did not know his name. Or perhaps he did know it, but he could not force it to slide from his tongue. So he simply said, 'Hello.'

"The Dark Lady turned and laughed and asked if he came to dance. The Prince asked the girl her name, but she told him that it was a secret, one he could never know. Again, she asked him if he came to dance. The Prince then explained that where he came from, dances were only for special occasions and official celebrations. One did not prance about like a madman for no good reason at all.

The Dark Lady cackled like a crow to hear this. 'Do you not dance just because your feet compel you? Do you not run screaming in the night, howling at the moon just for the sheer joy of it?' Such things were unheard of in the Prince's kingdom and in fact had never even occurred to him as possibilities, but suddenly they sounded like the most delightful pursuits in the world. She asked him why he was here, under the dancing moon, if he had not come to dance. He told her that he was lost, and did not know the path home.

" 'Let go of the reigns and your steed will always lead you where you need to go,' she told him. The Prince thanked her and continued to watch her dance.

"After a while, the Dark Lady told him that she must go, that she could not be in the forest when the sun rose, but if he came the next night, she would meet him again. But she had one condition: As she left, the Prince could not watch her go. On this, the Prince gave her his word.

"They met at the glade the next night and he brought her a rose, picked from the royal garden, well admired for its perfect symmetry. She thanked him. As she took the rose, a thorn pricked her finger and blood fell from it. She pulled out a handkerchief of snow white linen, and caught three drops of blood on it. She then gave the handkerchief to the Prince as a gift. And they danced together late into the night. 'Meet me again tomorrow night,' she told him, 'but do not watch me as I go.'

"The next night he came, and he brought her a handsome comb, carved from ivory, for her hair. In turn, she thanked him and then gave him a feather, black as the blackest night. Again they danced late into the night, and again she asked him to meet her the next night, and to promise not to watch as she left.

"And so the next night he came to her, and this time the Prince brought her a small golden ball, fashioned by the finest craftsmen in his Kingdom. It shone like the sun and rang like a thousand tiny bells when tapped with a finger. The Lady thanked him, and gave him a kiss in exchange for his presents. It was the sweetest kiss the Prince had ever known, though truth be

told, he had not collected many in his days.

"Of course, by now, the Prince had fallen madly in love with this Dark

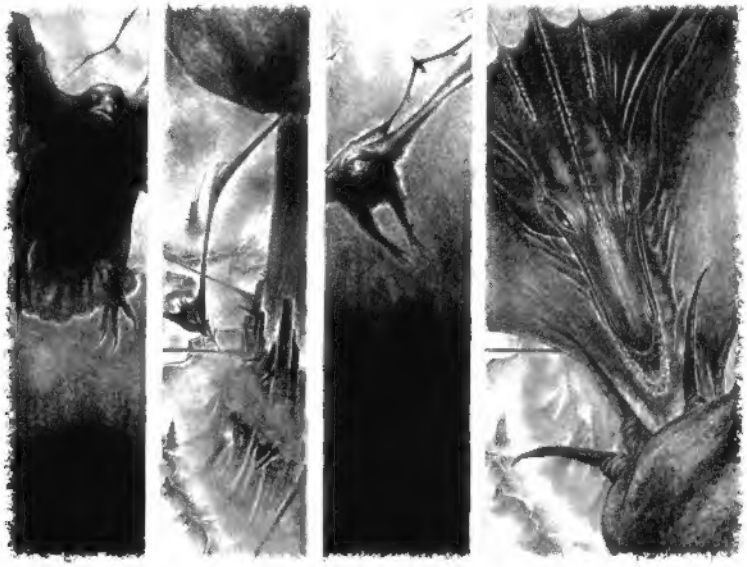
Lady. His soul was filled with wildness and passion for the first time in his life. He had a strange impulse to run through the streets of the Shining Kingdom in the dark of night, shouting at the top of his lungs and throwing stones through the windows of the ivory towers, waking everyone up. He dreamed of casting off his civilized self and running wild, like a beast through the night. These feelings troubled and shamed him. They were not emotions that a Prince should possess. Still, he agreed to meet her the next night. And he knew in his heart, that he would ask her to be his bride."

"On the following night he came to the glade, and as he approached he again heard singing. He stood in the shadows and watched her dancing in the starlight with her eyes closed, singing a strange rhyme to a sad, melancholy tune:

Come to me when the moon is bright,
When soft the nightlark sings
I will come to thee, in the cloak of night
Black as Raven's Wings

Come to me when the moon is high
When the north wind shakes the trees
Bring me a whisper and a sigh
And I'll trade you kisses three

Oh, come to me when the moon is pale
When the night is washed in gloom
Spin me promises cursed to fail
And then leave me to my doom



"Then she turned and opened her eyes and looked at the Prince and there was great sadness. The Prince was confused by her woeful look and asked what it was that troubled her. She told him that she could meet him no more, that she must go back to her sisters, who lived far away. The Prince protested and told her she could come live with him, in the brightest, most glittering kingdom in all the world. But she demurred, for that was no place for her. She told him that she belonged with her own kind, that she and her sisters had duties of their own. And that she had given him everything he could take from her.

" 'This is the last time I may see you,' she said. 'You must never think of me again. I must leave now. Do not follow me and promise that you will not watch as I go.'

The Prince nodded and turned around as she walked away. He mounted his horse and began to return home. But he did not get very far before his brave, dull little heart began to swell in his brave, dull breast. He wheeled his horse around and charged back, back in the direction of his dear, Dark Lady, deeper into the woods than he had ever gone before. After a while he saw a strange sight: a great bird, black as night, rise up above the trees and fly off, past the forest, past the mountains...

At this point a hand goes up and a child voices a question.

"Wait. How could the prince see all that if he is still in the Forest?"

"Shut up. You want me to stop? Okay, then."

"...Past the mountains, to the far side of the world where the shadows are longer than a man could ride in a day. Many days, without sleep, without break, he followed, until he came to behold a terrible sight.

"In a deep valley, a great Dark Tower rose more than half a league high. Spindly lances of dark crystal reached towards the heavens, glinting like black ice. Dark clouds blocked out the sun and the entire valley was haunted by the specter of death.

"Now our heroic young prince came to the only conclusion his brave but dull little head could reach. The woman he loved so was under a curse, held captive by some evil wizard. He vowed to vanquish the fiend and free his beloved. But he knew he could not do it alone.

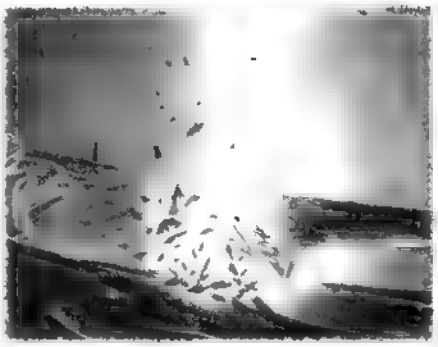
"So he went back to the edge of the mountains, past the dark clouds and called to his brothers. You see, the princes had been given a special gift when they were born, that they would always come to aid one another, and they could take on magical forms when they were together. And so the brothers came to him in the form of three great dragons, with eyes like jewels and gold scales shining brighter than the sun. They came to their brother and were glad to see him safe after so many days without a word. He told them his tale and they agreed to help him free the unfortunate prisoner. And so the Prince too took the form of a great, gold dragon and they flew off to lay siege to the Dark Tower.

"For half a day they attacked the fortress, unable to find any weakness in its edifice. But soon the tower began to rock and shake. Then, something emerged from the tower in a burst of light. Seven Ravens, with shiny black wings. They flew out and attacked the dragon brothers, using their razor claws to scratch at their eyes and giving out a great terrible cackling noise. These must be wicked guardians of the evil wizard, thought the brothers.

The dragons were strong and mighty, but the Ravens were swift and agile, and so the battle raged on. Soon the oldest brother noticed that one of the Ravens had a pouch of crimson silk around its neck. Now this brother had studied much and he knew that great sorcerers often kept their hearts outside of their bodies, to better work their wicked spells. He figured that if he could tear this sack away from the bird, its magic would cease. The dragon wheeled in and arced at the bird, which fluttered out of range. Again he tried and again he failed. But on his third pass, he grasped the pouch with his talons and the Raven gave out a terrible, mournful cry.

"At this moment, lightning flashed across the sky. The tower shook and quaked, and a rumbling sound, like shattering glass, grew deafening. One by one, the Ravens gave out a cry and then fell to the earth like stones. As the last one touched ground, the tower exploded into countless shards that darkened the sky as far as the eye could see.

"When the four brothers landed on the ground, they returned to the forms of men and looked around the wreckage for the cursed Ravens. But they found nothing, nothing but a single black feather. The young Prince soon felt his heart leap into his mouth. In their passion to free



his beloved, they had destroyed the tower and destroyed her as well. He fell to tears, sobbing madly, unable to speak. He had broken his vow and betrayed his love. His brothers could offer him no comfort, but led him back through the forest, back to their Shining Kingdom of gold. When they returned they told their father what happened, and the King explained that the youngest prince had mostly likely been bewitched by a terrible sorceress in order to steal control of their lands. The brothers had done the right thing, he told them. Later, in private, he asked the oldest brother to bring him the pouch he had stolen from the sorceress. The King opened it up and looked inside, expecting to find perhaps a black, misshapen heart, or some magical ward or charm. What he found was this: A rose of perfect symmetry, a finely carved ivory comb, and a small, shining ball of gold.

Here, the room stands silent as death, the children daring not even to breathe.

'For a year and a day afterwards, whenever it rained, the streets ran black with soot and when it snowed it was as if the Kingdom were draped in tar. And for all that time the moon never showed its face, and the wind blew cold at night in the Shining Kingdom.

And whatever happened to the Prince? Well, some say he refused to leave his chamber, refused food and drink, and eventually put his own eyes out with a poker for he had so grown to hate the sight of the sun. Others say he slipped away one night and headed off across the Great Eastern Sea, to the far lands, and that no one ever heard from him again But others say he went off to live in the woods where he could howl at the moon and run wild in the night and dance beneath the stars for no good reason, and that truly he had gone mad.

"Which of these is true, I cannot say. But if you ever find yourself in the forest when the full moon hangs cold in the sky, if you listen closely you might hear a voice singing on the wind.

'Oh, come to me when the moon is bright,
When soft the nightlark sings
I will come to thee in the cloak of night
Black as Raven's Wings'

Kildare sings this last part, sweeter and sadder than any nightingale, sending shivers down the spines of each child.

The children sit dumbtounded for a long moment, slowly emerging from the spell of Kildare's tale Several minutes pass before one boy, a goblin of some sort, breaks the silence.

"What does it mean?"

Kildare shrugs her shoulders 'I have given you a tale. I am not obliged

to give you a meaning."

Gillian, who is twelve and dressed as a nurse, speaks up.

"I know what it means," she says proudly. "It's a met-a-phor." She savors the word in her mouth, like some exotic delicacy. "It's all about destroying things we fear, because they're different, even if part of you likes them."

Kildare rolls her eyes. "It's not a 'metaphor.' It's a story. And it would be a poor story indeed if it had only one meaning. Any more bright questions?"

"Is it true?"

This time it is Ivy, seven years old and a honey bee, who speaks.

The first hints of laughter begin to rise up from the other children, but Kildare cuts them off with a keening glance. She turns to Ivy and smiles knowingly, like the cat who swallowed the moon. She leans in close to whisper to her, but loud enough for the others to hear.

"I'll let you in on a secret, sweetheart. All stories are true. And this one more than most. If you think about it, you'll see that stories are the only things that truly are real."

Ivy nods, understanding, and Kildare allows her one more piece of candy before shooing her out the door with the others, watching them spill out into the street.

Kildare is still smiling as she stares out the window into the cool October evening, the air heavy with the scent of pumpkin rind and candle wax, and echoing with the laughter of children running wild in the night

Special ARIA poster

by

Jay Anacleto

Brian Haberlin

and Drew

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Herewith we give you a brief glimpse into a remarkable cast of characters whom you will encounter in the pages of Aria in the coming months...

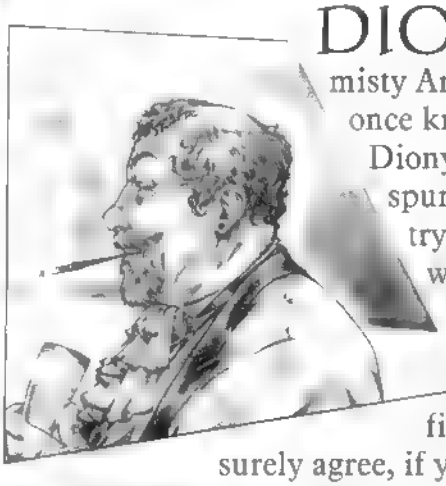
KILDARE ~ Or, more formally, Lady Kildare of the House of Dannan. She is a 900-year-old expatriate princess of Faerie, who has lived on "our" side of the metaphysical fence for the past several centuries. In her time she has danced with emperors, consorted with assassins, gotten blind drunk with rock stars. She has been painted by Rossetti, courted by Byron, and had songs written to her by Syd Barrett. She currently runs a bookstore/collectibles shop called "Otherworld" in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City, and serves as the unofficial matriarch and mascot to a group of displaced mythical beings who make their lives in our world. She is at the center of our story, the bright star around which all the other characters revolve. She is well schooled in the ways of magic, though she is wise enough not to make clumsy distinctions between the natural and supernatural. She has a lightning wit, a quick temper, impeccable taste, and a seemingly endless well of charm. She has a habit of going through lovers like she goes through shoes (which is to say, quite frequently). There is also fascinating moral flexibility to her, as all her vices for the most part come to her without consequence. In the end, Kildare of Faerie is many things: Beautiful, witty, compassionate, gregarious, lonely, impulsive, bitchy, manic, melancholy... a multi-faceted gem casting off bright colors to the gray world around her. Worship her. Adore her. Love her. Just don't piss her off.

THE PUG ~ Descended

from a long line of great Dwarven warriors, the being known to his friends as the Pug first stumbled into the mundane realm of our world 700 years ago, when he strayed from his battalion in a drunken stupor during the last great campaign in the Far Lands. Since that time, he has seen little reason to leave. He has been present at many noted historical events, from the battle of Agincourt to fields of the Somme. He fought as a mercenary in the armies of both Napoleon and Peter the Great, and in his time drunk what must amount to oceans of distilled spirits. A creature of great appetites, prodigious humor and iron-clad loyalties, he is perhaps Kildare's closest friend and companion.

GWYNNION ~

Kildare's cousin Gwynnion, often referred to as "Mad Ginny," was driven to insanity some 70-odd years ago after surviving a brutal Faerie massacre in the English town of Cottingley, during the famous outbreak of "Faerie Mania" that gripped that area earlier this century . She is a sad, delicate and profoundly damaged soul, and Kildare makes it a point to look after her.

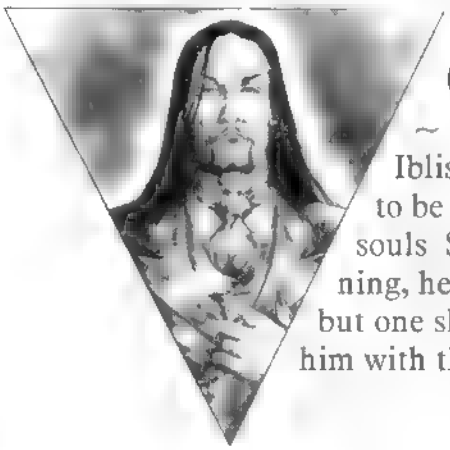


DION

~ In days long ago, in the misty Arcadian fields of memory, he was once known by a different name: Dionysus. He was the lord of revels, spurring the inhabitants of the countryside to wild, manic orgies, driving women to rend their husbands to pieces in mad, frenzied lust. Today? Well, today he runs a bar. But not just any bar. The finest bar in all of New York. You'll surely agree, if you can find it, and if you can remember where it was once you've left This former Olympian God has grown quite comfortable with his new role in life. As Dion himself would be the first to point out, even the finest wine mellows with age.

HAWTHORNE

~ A wild-eyed young man who rants constantly about fairies, demons and the coming of the "Dark One." A rambling madman or someone who's on to something? One thing's for sure: he's presently locked away in an English jail cell, so all's safe and sound, right? Right?



COUNT IBLIS

~ sovereign of the Velvet Marches. To Iblis, everything in life (and beyond) is to be bartered, bought and traded, even souls Silver-tongued and lethally cunning, he can be quite charming company, but one should only enter into a deal with him with the utmost caution.

CHILDE ROLAND ~ The mad, bad poet of the alley ways, Roland is a changeling, a half-faerie street artist who spends his days writing in curious verse and painting strange glyphs and images on walls, bus stops and billboards. Read in the proper order, his scribblings can transport mortals to unearthly realms.

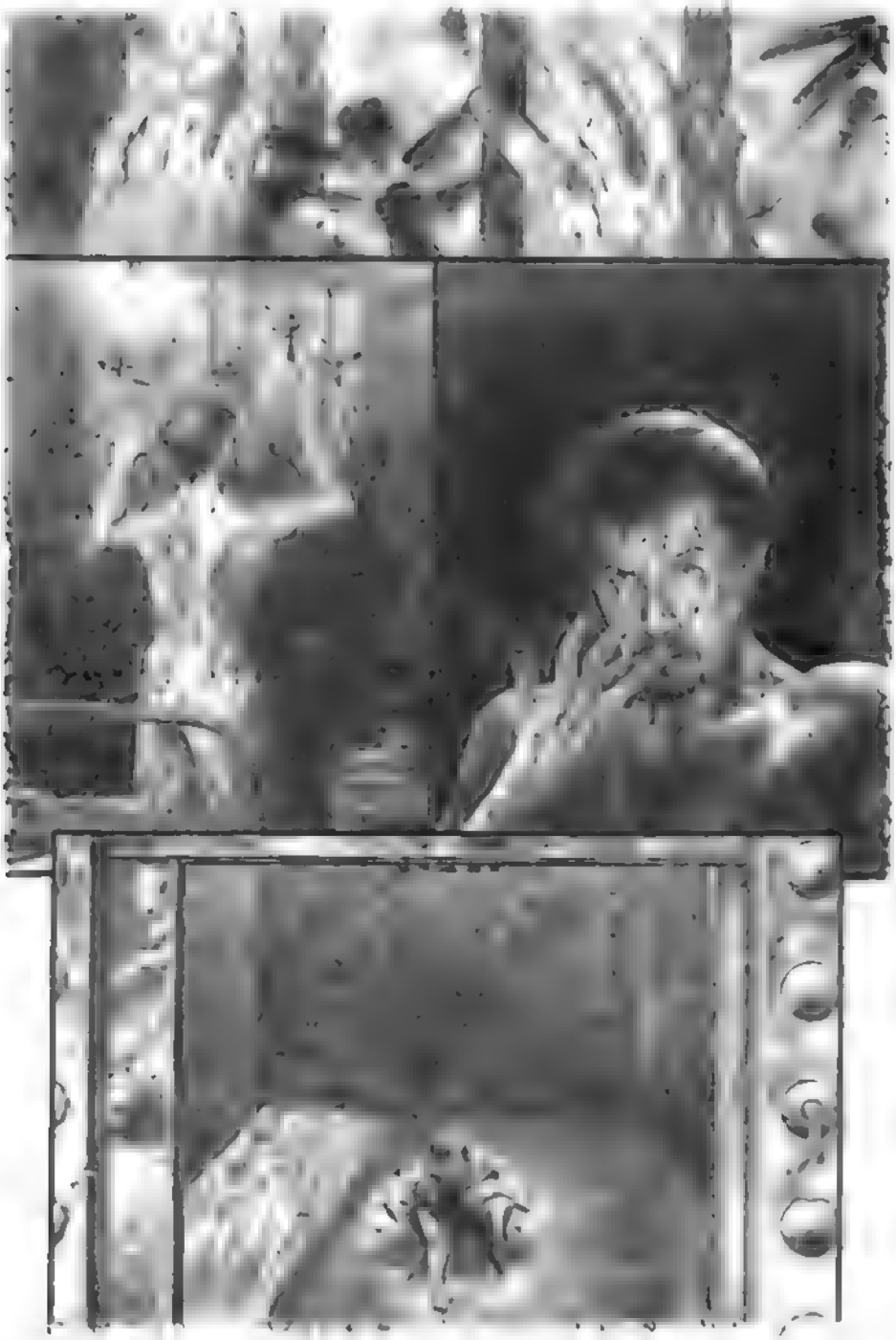
GOODFELLOW ~ The erstwhile "Puck" of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer's Night Dream," the mischievous and more-than-occasionally malicious Robin Goodfellow has been keeping a Manhattan address for sometime now. The king of tricksters, he was last seen stirring up some trouble with the city's underworld elements, all apparently for his own questionable amusement..

THE SPHINX ~ A strangely enigmatic gentleman of uncertain age, The Sphinx is a being obsessed with puzzles, riddles, conundrums, posers, etc. He'll sit for days in his sprawling apartment, putting together jigsaw puzzles in the dark while translating obscure Sanskrit religious mysteries in his head. Although fiercely solitary, his services are much sought after, for he possesses the peculiar ability to solve any riddle or open any seal given him. He collects puzzles and riddles jealously, and is usually working on half a dozen at any given time. The Sphinx demands a quid pro quo for his services ~ a riddle for a riddle Kildare sometimes pays for his services by passing on bad knock knock jokes.

LULLABY and ONDINE ~ Two of Kildare's closest gal pals. Lullaby is sunny and sweet, although a bit hopeless, and more than a bit clueless. However, she usually has little trouble getting by, due in large part to the fact that she causes men to do her bidding quite literally with a song. Ondine, a "recovering" Water Sprite, is a fiercely independent and somewhat stubborn individual, despite the fact that she is, technically, still the "property" of a rustic European village.

THE DARK ONE ~ Bad. Very bad. Stay away from him.

Preview pages from issue one of ARIA



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